



## SELECTING AN EXECUTIVE RECRUITER

Choosing a search consultant should be a two step process: developing strong, open communication with the search consultant, and speaking with references who can give you valid, independent evaluation of his or her skills and effectiveness. Omitting the references is perilous. A decision based only upon personal impressions is like buying jewelry from a street vendor, without consulting an appraiser first -- what glitters initially may prove to be of little value! The ideal way to evaluate a recruiter is to ask the people with whom he or she has worked.

Many search consultants are quite glib and can portray the executive search process to be virtually risk free when, in fact, what recruiters do is both difficult and hard to assess. If executive recruiting were more visible and less dependent upon the nuances of confidential conversations with candidates, an easy gauge of a recruiter's mettle could be devised.

Because no direct measurement tool exists, a tricky selection decision confronts the buyer of executive search services. As a first step, you should attempt to evaluate the search consultant's interpersonal skills through a personal meeting. Without references, however, this can reduce your decision to a personal assessment of an invisible process. Incorporating the evaluation and referencing recommendations that follow should take some of the risk out of the recruiter selection process.

## CRITICAL RECRUITING SKILLS

Several skills and abilities are correlated with highly effective recruiters. The primary skills every search consultant needs to have well developed are: building rapport; listening; interviewing; intuition; persuasion; negotiation and diplomacy. Each is critical to different stages of the recruitment process. Being aware of these is important during your evaluation, particularly to prepare the appropriate reference questions about a prospective recruiter.

### Rapport and its Importance

A recruiter's ability to establish rapport is one of the cornerstones of effective executive search consulting. Trust must be established immediately with client and candidate alike if the process is to be ultimately effective.

When selecting a search consultant, the most obvious "gut" measure is the recruiter's ability to make you feel comfortable, appearing in person to be professional and fully at ease. If a recruiter does not interact in an open, honest and forthright manner initially, you should look for someone else. The reason is simple -- you are not going to fully trust someone with an important executive recruiting project if they cannot relate openly to you at a peer level.



**This ability is critical for another reason -- good rapport is mandatory for quality interviews. Full and honest responses are not forthcoming from a candidate who is suspicious or uncomfortable with the interviewer.**

**But using rapport as the only guideline when selecting a search consultant can be a problem. Being able to establish good rapport does not indicate, by itself, that the consultant will be an effective interviewer, or that the results of the recruitment will be positive. Building rapport just happens to be one of the few factors immediately observable by the potential buyer. Use your sense of the recruiter's ability to establish rapport as a hurdle factor, not the only factor, in your decision.**

### **Listening**

**Good listening skills are highly correlated with success in all forms of consulting and executive search is clearly a field where those skills are paramount. They are particularly crucial to understanding the client's business and interpreting organizational dynamics.**

**If a recruiter interrupts frequently during your initial conversation, or appears not to be paying direct attention, important facts about the position will be missed. Without complete understanding, which flows from active listening, chances are that the search consultant will not interview properly. Select a consultant who listens attentively.**

### **Interviewing**

**A significant amount of a search consultant's time is spent interviewing -- he or she must interview client executives -- to gain a thorough understanding of the essential success factors attached to the position, candidates -- to assess their abilities, and references -- to verify that the candidates have the necessary skills to succeed in the position. Only with a highly skilled interviewer can you be confident that all the crucial facts have been gathered -- and gathered accurately.**

**Interviewing is part science and part art. Both aspects need to be well developed and, as with every other skill, training and practice are each very important. As a buyer of the service, you have the right to know under what circumstances the consultant learned to interview and for how long he or she has been interviewing as a professional.**

**Just because an individual is well versed in the function of a particular industry does not mean he or she will be able to gather critical data from an interview. One should be careful that the selection of a recruiter is equally balanced between the required professional skills and the particular functional or industry knowledge that may provide a relevant backdrop for the process.**

**Intuition**



Candidates and clients process information on many topics and levels in their daily roles. During their interactions with each other misperceptions can arise from physical interruptions, mental diversions, language barriers and other sources. In such circumstances, the recruiter's intuition becomes a valuable tool for sensing information blockages and redirecting conversations and feelings that have gone astray because of communication interference factors.

Practiced intuition also enables the consultant to advise the client as to when the candidate is "ready" for the next step or a formal offer. Many candidates are clearly receptive; while with others, waiting for the "right moment" to close the deal requires patience and finesse. Without an adequate intuitive sense, the timing may not go well in the critical end phase of a search.

### Persuasion

Virtually every candidate requires an additional "boost" by the search consultant to generate forward momentum and conclude an assignment. Persuasive skills must be well developed and appropriately brought to bear during the employment process.

Effective recruiting is not a "hard sell" form of influence. The recruiter gently removes obstacles that prevent a candidate from accepting a position. The search consultant must be able to play devil's advocate, leading the candidate to consider the critical elements of the new employment situation, but never overselling. If the candidate misperceives the position because it was sold too aggressively, unhappiness or even termination can result.

### Negotiation

When the offer is being drafted and accepted, search consultants often actively negotiate and mediate to help conclude the assignment at a reasonable cost level. This goes beyond persuasive intervention and requires an additional set of arbitration skills to balance the client's cost parameters and the candidate's ego needs.

### Diplomacy

To protect the client's image in a thoroughly professional manner many topics need to be broached with subtlety and tact during an assignment. Search consultants may need to communicate sensitive facts about a client -- such as deteriorating financial results, turnover, or dissatisfaction with an incumbent -- without denigrating the organization. Candidates must be encouraged to discuss private matters and address family issues. Rejected candidates need to be dealt with carefully, to protect their self-esteem. All these activities require significant diplomacy.



## **CHARACTERISTICS OF OUTSTANDING SEARCH CONSULTANTS**

In addition to the preceding skills outlined, the best recruiters tend to possess a matrix of additional characteristics that enhance their effectiveness. You may notice that these skills are more easily evaluated by third parties than interview questioning.

### **Integrity**

Because a search consultant works one-on-one as he or she deals with sources, candidates and references, the only control that assures honest dealings with client and candidate is the consultant's personal integrity. A significant amount of trust is placed in the recruiter to represent the organization appropriately and identify the very best set of candidates from the targeted marketplace.

A recruiter without a solid ethical foundation is apt to take short-cuts. This could include misrepresenting the nature of the client organization, compensation parameters, or the candidate's skills, abilities and accomplishments. Be sure you are represented by a professional consultant who has high personal standards, confirmed by third-party references.

Strong integrity allows for full appreciation of the confidential nature of search projects. In no instance should your trust be placed in a consultant who glibly discusses past recruiting "stories" which name candidates or disclose company specifics. Highly-motivated, honorable recruiters understand that the basis of their business is confidential problem-solving. No social conversation or sales presentation should be worth jeopardizing a client's confidence.

### **Persistence**

Recruiters need to be unrelentingly persistent if the job is going to get done. Hundreds of sources need to be contacted on every search, many of whom are not particularly motivated to make the recruiter a top priority. Candidates who refuse initial involvement must be reapproached. References must be pursued on short timetables. Every recruiter should be part bulldog.

### **Intelligence**

Search engagements beget unique situations, and search consultants must have the intellectual capability to quickly and accurately master the critical elements of a position, an organization and an industry. Otherwise, the job simply doesn't get done efficiently or correctly.

Besides intelligence, virtually all first-class recruiters have a spry wit. Many times the objections candidates set in the path of a discussion can be best removed through a quick



retort and a change of subject -- to be re-addressed later for full discussion when the candidate is more willing to face the topic openly.

### **Understanding Human Behavior**

While not all recruiters have been formally trained in the behavioral sciences, the better ones have learned the normative expectations for individual and group behavior. They understand the dynamics of developmental psychology to the extent that they can quickly identify longitudinal behavior patterns and project a candidate's probable compatibility with the client organization's work style and group structure.

While understanding human behavior is the first step, the ability to assess candidates is essential for a search consultant and a function of innate judgmental skills and significant experience gained over time. Probing what factors are given weight by the recruiter in the interview will get to the heart of this issue. The recruiter who demurs by implying that you have the assessment responsibility is not providing full service. Those who say they "just know good talent" may only be guessing.

### **Ambiguity Tolerance**

A search consultant needs to be comfortable working in an environment where an assignment's end result has no true benchmarks until the final candidate has resigned and is on route to the new assignment. While there are average times for assignment completion, each assignment follows a unique chain of events. A spouse who decides not to relocate, or an attractive counter-offer, can push timing beyond earlier expectations. Recruiters have to cope with this open-ended format. Those who cannot may try to force a premature end to the process by lobbying for the employment of a candidate with marginal qualifications.

### **Need for Closure**

This is not to say that recruiters should have no sense of pace. On the contrary, a strong need for closure and a sense of urgency are required to complete the assignment on the client's timetable, constantly focusing on the ultimate quality of the process.

### **Social Graces**

You need to be certain your search consultant can operate effectively in a broad spectrum of interpersonal circumstances and not be an embarrassment to your organization. Poor self-presentation by the recruiter in terms of grooming, dress, or annoying habits can cause an excellent candidate to withdraw and never get to your office. Similarly, poor command of language or the unnecessary use of slang and profanity can have an adverse affect on some candidates. Even if you are not offended personally with these factors, a candidate



may react negatively to them. Never settle for less than total professional conduct -- it is far more important than the industry knowledge a recruiter may possess.

### **THE RECRUITERS BACKGROUND**

No single issue seems to muddle recruiter selection more than a search consultant's experience prior to entering the recruiting field. Highly effective recruiters can come from human resources, line management, not-for-profit organizations and even directly from MBA programs. What the outstanding ones have in common is that they are made, not born, through an old-fashioned apprenticeship process of learning skills from master practitioners.

Ineffective recruiters come from exactly the same backgrounds -- except they haven't had the required skill training. As an industry without a professional credentialing mechanism, anyone can proclaim to be an executive recruiter -- without skills -- without training -- without any comprehension of the complexities of the task.

A consultant who "really knows the industry," or has "a lot of contacts" will not necessarily prove to be a quality recruiter. One cannot judge recruiting effectiveness by prior, unrelated work experience. However, if a recruiter has all of the skills and abilities generic to effective recruiting and an industry background cogent to the specific recruitment, it can be helpful in analyzing candidates and the organizations in which they have functioned.

Highly-skilled recruiters can cross industry and functional lines with ease. Ineffective recruiters, in spite of attractive industry affiliations, can lead you through a frustrating experience to a sub-optimal result.

### **THE RECRUITER'S FIRM**

Up to this point, there has been no discussion relative to selecting a search firm. This was not an oversight. Your focus should be evaluating the abilities of the individual consultant -- firms do not recruit executives, individuals do.

The primary role a firm plays is to provide a supportive environment for the recruiter's individual talent. If the recruiter's firm espouses high ethical performance and standards while providing a reward structure keyed to client satisfaction, these factors should reinforce the potential use of that recruiter's services. If standards are low and rewards keyed to sales, the firm may be motivating the recruiter to a set of results inconsistent with clients' best interests.



### **Ethical Standards**

The best way to ascertain ethical framework is to determine whether the consultant works for a firm that has a published set of ethical guidelines outlining how to deal with clients, sources and candidates. It may be beneficial to probe how those ethics are incorporated into the recruiter's operating style as well. Since ethical and professional standards are inexorably linked, be certain the ethics are the foundation of the practice and not perceived as a nuisance or ignored.

### **Operating Procedures**

The firm's operating procedures may be significant in your decision. In some firms, a consultant does all of the work involved in the assignment, from initial sourcing calls through telephone screening to personal interviews and references. Other firms have relationships similar to advertising agencies, with account executives that sell assignments and present resumes to clients but are otherwise uninvolved in the recruiting process.

Most firms have evolved a hybrid process which they believe functions most effectively for their organization. All formats can work, but you should be comfortable with the execution philosophy of the firm you select. The industry consensus is that the best matching of candidate to client occurs when the individual with the most intimate client executive contact personally conducts the interviews and references.

### **Reward Structure**

In some recruiting firms, senior practitioners are rewarded solely on the basis of the assignments they sell and not on the fulfillment of those assignments. Determine which behavior is being rewarded and who is really going to be working on the assignment. If you did a careful job evaluating the person who sold the work, later to discover he or she is not going to be involved personally with the search, the wrong recruiter was evaluated!

### **Collective Experience and Blockage**

In addition to providing a supportive environment, executive search firms have collective experience and networks that may be of help during a specific assignment. Several important factors come into play here.

A firm with many clients in an industry has less fulfillment flexibility. Because most firms' ethics prohibit recruiting candidates from any organization that has retained them during the prior two to three years, a firm that has worked actively for half of a potential client's competitors may know the business very well. However, they can approach 50% fewer potential candidates than a firm with modest experience in that industry. This becomes a critical dilemma. Selecting a firm with relevant industry or functional experience may



appear to enhance turnaround time. However, it is more important to have market latitude and an effective individual recruiter on the job.

To understand the implications of a firm's off-limits policy, you need to know specifically where the firm is blocked. This includes disclosure of which corporate entities are off-limits; for how long; and whether the blockage includes parent plus divisions, subsidiaries and affiliates or just some component entities. Refusal to disclose is unfair to you as a potential client and predictive of significant blockages.

Another nuance requires differentiation between an individual consultant's experience and the "firm's" experience. The recruiter may represent the firm's experience either by listing a number of clients or by citing relevant assignments statistically. Without further questioning, you may not learn that the recruiter you are about to employ has done none of that work, though the assignments were conducted by the firm.

You could also find that the work represented as the "firm's" may have been done primarily by people who are no longer employed there or who are at offices far distant from the region where you wish to focus your efforts. When factoring specific past assignments into your decision process, be sure that any credentials presented are truly relevant.

### Fee and Expense Structure

Firms set fee and expense policies which are modified only in rare circumstances. Rates may vary upward from 30 percent of total annual cash compensation and a variety of items may be billed as expenses. Universally, expenses include telephone charges and candidate and recruiter travel expenses, while various formats exist for billing research, report preparation and administrative overhead charges. The result is that a real cost differential can result from firm to firm. However, since penny-wise and pound-foolish can be very expensive in executive recruiting, most decisions turn on competency rather than modest cost differentials. What one cannot afford is to hire a recruiter who leads you to the wrong executive.

### International Structure

Multi-national recruiting is one area in which the firm's characteristics will affect your selection. International executive search is generally organized in one of three formats: independent, indigenous local firms (who know their area's business climate, industries and key executives); branch offices of large, international firms which encourage consistent standards and the flow of inter-office communications); and "networked" search firms.

Whichever organizational structure you deem best, again it is essential to confirm that the individual recruiter doing the work overseas is competent, ethical and skilled. Proceed



with the selection of an overseas search consultant with the same rigor which would be applied at the home office.

## MEASURING STICKS

Three of the most commonly used measures for evaluating the quality of a firm and a search consultant are average search completion time; "fill" rates, and repeat clientele. Again, one should be careful to determine whether an individual recruiter's statistics are the same as, greater than, or less than firm averages. Be suspicious of anyone who cannot quote these statistics. They may be hiding some unsavory numbers or their results orientation may not be up to your standards.

### Average Completion Time

The cycle time from the onset of a search to offer acceptance varies according to circumstances unique to every recruiting assignment. However, recruiters who are more facile tend to have shorter average completion times than those who are not as skilled or diligent in their work.

Recruiting projects take significant time and effort to execute properly. An average turnaround time (commencement to offer acceptance) which is under eight weeks should be regarded as a sign of slipshod work without appropriate focus on the generation and evaluation of uniquely qualified candidates. Anything in excess of 16 weeks average completion time may indicate a lack of attention to the process or a low need for closure on the part of the recruiter. An exception can be made for situations at the most senior levels, which require more research time and deal with candidates whose schedules are difficult to access.

### Percentage Fill Rate

The intended result of every executive search is for the recruiter to identify and place a candidate. For a variety of reasons, not all executive searches end this way. The organization's restructuring, for instance, may result in a position being eliminated or in a transfer or promotion fulfilling the need. As a result, no recruiter has a 100 percent completion ratio and ratios do vary considerably among firms and recruiters. If you are playing the odds, knowing completion rates is a smart way to handicap your decision. As a rule of thumb, regard anything over 80 percent as very high and recognize that 60 percent is not unheard of on the low side.

### Repeat Clientele

Perhaps the best way to grasp the esteem in which a particular recruiter is held is to know what percentage of clients use the recruiter on an on-going or repetitive basis. Since success breeds new assignments, this should mirror the fill rate. Because the comfort level



with the recruiter as an individual can also be assessed by this measure, it adds a qualitative dimension to the statistic.

### **REFERENCING RECRUITERS**

All of the foregoing should point out the difficulty of selecting an executive recruiter based solely on first impressions or the firm's promotional literature. It seems impossible to make an optimum decision in the absence of conducting references.

Perhaps the most disappointing event which professional recruiters experience is to be "de-selected" in the absence of reference checking. Good recruiters know the power of references in their own professional work and want to be judged by their results, not by appearances. As a rule, firms openly willing to give references are probably going to receive the best response. Be sensitive to any defensiveness in providing references.

In many parts of the world, you can and should request a list of all of the clients served by the recruiter over the period of the last two or three years. Focus on specific assignments, which were the responsibility of the individual who intends to do your work. Because recruiting is an individual skill, be certain to talk to those who have used the search consultant personally. Conversing with people who have used the firm, but not the specific recruiter, gives no insights into the approach, skills or success quotient of the individual in whom so much trust and responsibility will be placed. Absent strong references, the rule is: Buyer Beware!

To aid in your decision process, a brief list follows to be used as a guide for productive questioning.

#### **Questions to ask the search consultant:**

- 1. How do you assess candidates? What factors are given the most weight in an interview?**
- 2. What aspects of the search do you handle personally? What role do your researchers or other associates play, and how experienced are they?**
- 3. Who conducts reference checks? How many references are contacted and in what depth are they interviewed?**
- 4. What functional and industry background do you bring) to the search profession? How long have you been interviewing executives professionally? Where did you learn your skills?**



**Questions to ask about the firm:**

- 1. In my industry, where is your firm “blocked?” In what specific ways will this blockage affect the search?**
- 2. What are your firm-wide averages of search completion time, fill rates and repeat clients? (What rates do you personally average?)**
- 3. To what professional organizations does your firm belong and at what level do your principal consultants participate?**
- 4. What are the operating ethical parameters of your organization?**

**Questions to ask the firm's references:**

- 1. When did you last work personally with the search consultant? What were your general impressions of his or her competence?**
- 2. How well did he/she listen and how well did he/she draw intrinsic conclusions from your comments?**
- 3. How would you rate this consultant's abilities to:**
  - make concise, accurate assessments?
  - deliver services on time or as promised?
  - assist your firm in negotiation with the final candidate(s)?
- 4. Were there ever any questions of integrity or violations of confidentiality during the search?**
- 5. How did you feel about the way rejected candidates were handled by this consultant?**
- 6. Were search details (reports, billing, expenses) executed professionally and in a timely manner?**
- 7. Did you learn from this consultant? In what, if any, ways did this consultant make a unique contribution to the successful resolution of your problem?**
- 8. What were the most and least impressive aspects of your work with this consultant?**
- 9. Would you hire this consultant -- and his/her firm -- for another search? Why or why not?**