

Four Steps to Choosing an Excellent Executive Search Firm

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January 12, 2009
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Step One – Getting Beyond the Façade

LARGE FIRMS

Large firms often make impressive initial presentations by presenting slick brochures, upscale offices, well educated professionals and extensive client lists. However, the first contact is often with an Office Manager or Senior Partner and not with the people that will actually be doing the search: people who scan directories and files and other sources to get preliminary lists of candidates, others (often people in training) who make the initial telephone contact and do the preliminary screening of possible candidates and then the principal assigned to the search. It is extremely important to find out and to get to know the person who will actually be the contact and to have a strong voice in selecting that person.

REGIONAL or MID-SIZE FIRMS

Regional or mid-sized firms typically have a three tiered approach in which partners and senior consultants handle large clients; associates and people yet to have ownership or a partnership deal with medium-sized clients, and the trainees handle lower level searches and smaller clients. When these firms are busy they can get overloaded and may not provide timely or thorough service.

BOUTIQUE FIRMS

Small firms which rely on one to four key people are usually staffed with a couple of very experienced people and then others who have solid exposure and experience. Such firms usually have specialists who are industry specific and are well known within their specialty or generalists who can work on searches in a variety of industries and the recruiters provide very personalized hands-on service. But, if there are needs for many searches at once they may have trouble meeting the demand or may need to get other smaller firms involved and this can present administrative demands which are challenging for such firms.

Step Two – Learning the Firm's Approach and Processes

Ask these key questions:

- Who will be meeting personally with the hiring manager and key executives at my company and who will be involved in the hiring process?
- Will a written and comprehensive summary of the position requirements be provided and by when? This document elaborates on the company, scope of the position, expectations, etc. and should always be pulled together by the search consultant who met with the hiring team from inside the company.

- Which companies are off-limits? These are companies that retained the firm in the past and have agreements in place that preclude or limit them from directly recruiting company employees. Typically, these agreements are in place for two years beyond the last retained search project with a company. With large global firms this could be half of the companies that you would like the search firm to penetrate.
- Who will actually conduct the research efforts on the targeted companies and individuals? Will this be done by administrative people or by the actual recruiter?
- Who will actually contact the candidates in the direct recruiting efforts? Will these be trainees in recruiting or experienced people in the firm or the actual senior recruiter managing the assignment?
- Who will conduct the interviews with the candidates? Will they have a good feel for the chemistry and fit issues which are the number one criteria to a successful hire?
- Who will handle the reference checks and will they know the vital questions to ask to ascertain candidate expertise and fit issues as well as future advancement potential?

Step Three – Evaluate the person actually doing the work

- What is this person's background and how relevant is it to our needs?
- Do they show evidence of curiosity and interest in our company, our industry, our people and this assignment?
- Do they have the capacity to listen effectively, to learn our needs rather than simply trying to impress us with the attributes of their company?
- What is their actual track record? In what ways have their candidates performed well in meeting or exceeding the requirements of the jobs they have filled?
- How effectively does this person meet others and will they work effectively with our people? Will they be truly hands-on, involved and fit in?
- Will this person be able to do the work in terms of their know-how, schedule and resources?
- How effectively will they structure and schedule the work to be done? Will they provide us with clear benchmarks for progress and provide us constant feedback regarding their progress?

- Will they help us expand our knowledge, insights and perspective? What can we learn from them?
- Will we want them to be a part of our team and to come back repeatedly for additional work in the future?
- Are they professional? What ethical and professional standards do they adhere to? Are they experienced, well-trained and involved in professional networks and ongoing professional development? Can they keep confidences and do they respect the needs of their clients and candidates?
- Are they well-educated and experienced in business in general? Do they offer clear fee arrangements and professional accounting and billing standards? Will they treat our money and resources as carefully as we do?

Step Four – Ensuring that the Candidate makes a successful transition

After the slate of finalists is interviewed by the hiring team, the post interview feedback from both the company and the candidate is crucial. Keep in mind that the search consultant is retained and acting as the company's agent and he/she should work diligently to address every issue uncovered through feedback.

To assure success, the search consultant should be intimately involved with the actual offer and package being extended to the successful candidate. Always be sure to get an acceptance letter in writing. Doing this promotes buy-in and conviction.

The search consultant needs to stay in touch with the successful candidate once or twice a week to make sure that the resignation from his employer is going smoothly and to keep the client in close touch with the candidate.

The search person needs to make sure that more than one candidate is qualified for the position and stays involved in case the lead candidate chooses another offer from a different firm or decides not to make the change. Should you be unable to get the #1 candidate, for whatever reason, you want the #2 candidate excited and interested.

The Bottom Line

The actual search consultant is the most important component for a company to consider when picking a search firm and consultant to serve their needs. This relationship evolves and is incredibly important to success - assisting your company in putting a world class team together. We highly recommend that you do references with the managers and professionals who have used the search consultant under consideration. Success and effectiveness require that you select and evaluate your recruiter and firm as carefully as you do the people you want to join your company.