

ITP Worldwide

How do you choose one Search Consultant over another?

"One of our partners has had the unique experience of rotating more than once between Senior Executive positions in the high-tech industry and the Executive Search and Assessment field, and he gives some insights on this subject"

Over my rather long career I have moved twice between executive search and senior international management positions in the computer industry.

For a long time I have found that it is tricky for a Search Consultant to differentiate himself from the competitive pack: all offerings are pretty standard and hence it is difficult for a Company to make the best informed decision as to which Consultant to select.

And here I have found many times that the Client Company does not actually ask and insist on the truly differentiating questions. The reasons for this hinge probably on a relatively sketchy understanding of how the executive search process really works.

Decision makers in Client organisations being HR managers and/or line managers, it is also true that these differentiating questions are more often asked by the HR professional who will often better understand how executive search works than the line managers who will naturally be less connected to the head hunting world.

So, what are those critical issues that are regularly not thoroughly addressed by the Client when selecting a potential executive search supplier?

To my mind the critical areas which are either addressed superficially or not at all, should generate three main questions:

First question: *How does the Search firm find the candidates?* This is a question which is asked almost all the time but which too often receives those "plain vanilla" answers that do everything except help the Client understand who would do a better job at the candidate identification stage. "Plain vanilla" answers are typically "we have an up-to-date data base of 120,000 names", "we will use our very large contact base in the industry to....", etc...

The Client has a number of ways of trying to really qualify the candidate recruiter. Let me give just one example. If you ask the question: which target companies currently have key employees particularly open for a change?

The answer will help you assess how much the recruiter understands your competitive environment and how much he is aware of the latest development in your business sector, such as M&A activity for example. It is indeed far more important to know that Company X is subject to a hostile take over than to have 200 people of Company X on file but not know that they would be ready to get out.

Second question: *How well will the Consultant be able to attract candidates for the open position and the Company?* This is actually a question rarely addressed by the Client. At times the recruiter will ask this question himself for him to be more effective. However the question of which of the candidate recruiters will be the best salesman for the position has generally not been answered at that point. I think intuition will be part of the judgment. The Client can form his opinion about which Consultant understands his business best and will have better abilities to sell the Client's Company and vacancy.

The other part however has to do with the process. So, a key question to be asked is: how are potential candidates first approached? Do you have a research department that will describe the job and the environment to the prospective

candidate, or do you do it yourself, or does a secretary call first and pass a job description? In case you do it yourself, what will be the key arguments you will use to capture your target candidate's interest? Needless to say that many potential candidates may be lost right from the start if they are not approached properly. This pleads for the Consultant being involved personally as soon as possible in the process.

Third question: *How much will the Consultant be dedicated/motivated to do this search?* Motivation and dedication will make a BIG difference.

Firstly, the Client should not confuse here the enthusiasm of the typical salesman's behaviour with the motivation to do a great job. Moreover, in many cases the Consultant who is "selling" is not necessarily the one who does most of the work and often some more junior professionals take charge of several important steps of the search assignment.

Secondly, there is an interesting caveat, which may have consequences that are not being thought through. That is that the executive search profession is one of the very few consulting businesses that is not remunerated on the basis of "time spent". This is all justifiable as some searches will go very fast and some others will take a lot of time. The way this profession is then remunerated, that is, a fee as a percentage of salary, is the translation of averaging our time spent per assignment. This model will however work against the perfectionists who will try to turn every stone in the market place in order to really find the best possible candidate. Others (and in particular those working for the larger Companies who will have their own sales targets, etc....) will be much more aware of the "time is money" factor and will therefore tend to look for a speedy solution rather than the best possible solution.

How does a Client evaluate the Consultant's attitude in this respect? Companies will generally be able to figure out whether a Consultant is really "Client-centric" or not. Beyond that, a Client would need to understand if a Consultant tends to be overloaded or not. If overloaded, the red light signal should go on. But a Consultant who is out of work and ready to spend 100% of his time for ONE search is not the right answer either as he will probably not be as immersed in the relevant market place as somebody who is overloaded.

Hence, probably the right answer is somewhere in the middle.

As a conclusion and having been on both sides of the fence, it is clear to me that Companies have a hard time in selecting their executive Search Consultants. At the end of the day, they make their choice based on the reputation of the firm, its level of specialisation and recent experience in similar searches, its fee level and structure, and, last but not least, the empathy with the Consultant who is "selling" the services of his firm.

But if, as a Client, you have in addition the ability to properly evaluate responses to the three questions posed above, you will be in a much better position to select your best possible recruitment provider.

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