

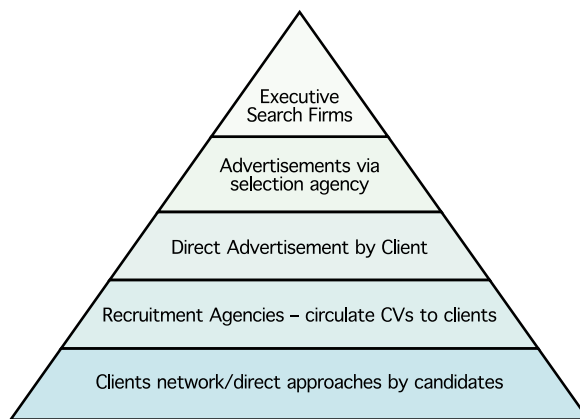
# Executive Search – Art or Science?

Executive search, or headhunting as it is more commonly known, is one of the ways many of us will find a new job at some point in our careers. In today's job market there is much confusion amongst both clients and candidates about the role of the headhunter, and there is a tendency to call anyone involved in the placement of candidates in companies 'a headhunter'. In this article Sue Harris of Andersen Piquet Ltd explains what a headhunter does, what processes are followed, and gives some hints on dealing with them. It also addresses the question of whether successful headhunting is largely dependent on a rigorous process or the old boys' network, and the role of creativity and flair.

## Recruiting

The recruitment market can, simplistically, be divided into a number of segments, most of which you will be familiar with.

The pyramid is not intended to suggest that one method is better than another, but instead shows the many alternative routes that companies can take in attracting talent to their organisation. Companies often use several routes simultaneously.



Broadly, the role and positioning of an executive search firm includes:

- assisting and challenging the client in the definition of the brief
- undertaking an extensive sweep of a defined market to identify qualified candidates
- being retained on an exclusive basis by the client to undertake a search
- either being generalists covering all market sectors or specialists by marketplace or by functional discipline.

Search is not always the most effective way of identifying suitable candidates; it does, however, identify and draw into the pool candidates who are not currently looking for a new position and thus would not be scanning job advertisements. In fact, one of the main differences between search and other methods of recruitment is that candidates who are not actively seeking a move are attracted into the process. Anonymity can also be afforded by using a headhunting route where the client doesn't want to alert the competition to their recruitment activity. Anonymity and confidentiality are also important when looking for a replacement for an existing incumbent.

## The process

A headhunter acts on behalf of the client. Whilst the process can vary, depending on the firm and the precise requirements of an assignment or client, in general the search process will include the following stages. In its simplest form an executive search firm is approached by a client who might be seeking, for example, a General Manager, Medical Director, Marketing Director, Sales Director, Operations Manager or Business Development Manager. The company would want the headhunter to go into the marketplace to search for and identify people who fit the specification in terms of qualifications, experience, skills and personality. The firm is retained by the client, which means that a fee is paid up-front. This differs from recruitment agencies, for example, who circulate CVs to clients they think might be interested, or who provide CVs from their database to clients, and who are paid on a contingency basis.

In taking a brief from a client, a good executive search company spends a lot of time getting to know the company; its expectations, its culture, its strategy and its goals, so that they are in the best possible position to present a professional and informed picture to any potential candidates.

They would then prepare a detailed document profiling the company, the role, the person specification and the key selection criteria against which candidates will be assessed. Once this is agreed with the client, the search begins. Most executive search firms have fairly extensive databases, which are usually the starting point for identifying sources and contacts. Directories, websites, the Internet, conference programmes and many other sources are used in the building of a target list of names of potential contacts. Networking is one of the ways that potential names will be identified, but long gone are the days of the successful headhunter with his fat black book of telephone numbers and his long executive lunches.

Clients expect a full sweep of the marketplace to ensure they have a comprehensive long list of the best potential candidates that the market can offer. Executive search, in part because of the fee structure, tends to operate at more senior levels, although this does not mean that middle management positions are not appropriate for search. Indeed companies often use executive search for middle management positions which have previously, and unsuccessfully, been advertised. Search can therefore be entirely appropriate when the skills and experience sought are particularly unusual and in short supply. For instance, there is currently

significant demand in business development and licensing roles where companies may want experience of negotiating contracts, but are willing to train people who already have a strong track record of achievement in the pharmaceutical industry.

When very unusual or in-demand skills are required, the headhunter's role begins to resemble that of a detective, and no stone is left unturned in the search for clues leading to qualified and appropriate candidates. Diligence, tenaciousness, rigour and a real feel both for the marketplace and for the client's needs and culture are the essential qualities for success.

When suitable candidates have been identified, the process of contacting and assessing them against the criteria for the role begins. Good candidates are regularly contacted by headhunters, and the consultant needs to be extremely professional in finding a way of motivating the candidate to take it further. If the candidate appears a good fit at this screening stage, the headhunter will want to see a CV and may also send the profile document describing the company and position to the potential candidate.

Once a long list (say 8–12 candidates) has been provided to the client, those to be interviewed by the search firm are agreed following detailed discussions with the client and objective recommendations from the headhunter based on the CV, the initial screening telephone discussion and, most importantly, a comparison against the key criteria already agreed.

Following this discussion, the headhunter interviews all these candidates and evaluates them against the selection criteria, and a short list of candidates to be interviewed by the client is drawn up. For each of these a detailed candidate profile is prepared, comprising biographical information, career and compensation details and the headhunter's appraisal and assessment of their fit against the original specification. Psychometric profiling is often used at this stage as an additional assessment tool.

Candidates usually go through a number of rounds of interviews, meeting several people within the organisation, before a final offer is made. Throughout this process the headhunter acts as a facilitator, mediator and adviser. Executive search firms then assist with the salary negotiations if desired and undertake referencing of the candidate.

The placement of the candidate is often not the end of the process. Post-placement follow-up discussions ensure that both the client and the appointee are satisfied with the arrangement. This ongoing contact can be very valuable in identifying any issues at an early stage and can help facilitate the candidate's integration into their new organisation.

Occasionally things do not work out, for whatever reason, and most firms will offer a guarantee that if the candidate leaves the client's employment within 6 months the search will be redone at no further fee.

### What should a client expect from a headhunter?

- The firm working on their assignment should have a good understanding of the marketplace and take the

time to ensure they fully understand the client's organisation, goals and culture.

- The firm should represent the client in a highly professional and informed manner.
- Regular (at least weekly) telephone and written updates on progress in identifying candidates as well as market feedback and relevant benchmarking information.
- Speed of initial identification of target candidates and a diligent and thorough search in all relevant organisations.
- Above all, the client should expect the identification of a number of highly qualified candidates within the agreed time-frame, followed by the successful placement of the chosen candidate.

### What should a candidate expect

- That they will be dealt with professionally and openly and that they will be kept informed of progress throughout the process.
- A good briefing from the headhunter and rapid feedback at all stages.

### Dos and don'ts in dealings with headhunters

1. **Do take the call.** What is there to lose?
2. **Do have an up-to-date CV.**  
This is a good discipline even if you are not thinking of moving. It means you can keep your achievements recorded and should that perfect opportunity present itself you will be prepared.
3. **Do be professional.**  
Even if you are not interested this time, you might be next time!
4. **Do focus on the role, not the salary.**  
Compensation is important to most people no matter what the management gurus may say! However, trying to pin down the precise salary and benefits package too early is a fruitless exercise. Salary is usually genuinely flexible for the right candidate.

### Summary

A rigorous and thorough process is a prerequisite for successful executive search work. Without it the fundamental building blocks are not in place to allow the creative aspects of the process to develop. At its core, however, executive search is about people – finding people, communicating with people, assessing people and motivating people. People are unique and need to be treated as such. A good headhunter knows their market, thrives on detective work and brings creative flair to the process through their communications with others. Thus, although underpinned by a rigorous, analytical approach, executive search remains very much an art.

Importantly too, executive search is a long-term business where the talented candidates of today could be important clients in the future. Building up client and candidate satisfaction and trust is the key to success. ■

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