

How to Select an Executive Search Firm:

Selecting an executive search firm for your organization is a challenge. No formula exists to make the decision obvious. Name on the door, size of organization, number of offices and automated retrieval systems bear no relation to a firm's ability to effectively represent your interests. The reason is simple – executive search is a personal service where success is based upon the individual search consultant's ability to manage human interaction.

In your selection process, here are the questions to ask:

1. Objective Evaluation Criteria

- * Ability to comprehend the role, and help define/refine the job and essential candidate characteristics. Will a written position specification be prepared?
- * Experience in recruiting at similar levels, and overall experience in search.
- * Experience in the market you want to tap, be it functional or geographical
- * What companies are off limits to the search firm? Does their off limits list constrict the market too much, such that your needs are not able to be met.
- * Method of search consultant compensation – retained or contingency. Method of compensation defines the product/service you receive. A retained searcher will provide a full service; a contingency recruiter will try to make a “sale” as fast as possible. The question here is how much service do you want and need?
- * Is the fee arrangement clear to you? Do they put it in writing? Are expenses to be billed in addition to the fee? What is the typical amount of expenses incurred for comparable searches?
- * Who is going to do the work on the search? What is his/her experience? If more than one person, how are the responsibilities allocated? Are you only meeting the experienced business development person, when in fact a back office recruiter will do all the work? Make sure you know, and are comfortable with, the specific recruiter assigned to the project.
- * Current work load. Anything over five or six current assignments means that your search won't get the time and attention it deserves.
- * Ask about their completion percentage. Be cautious of a record of less than 90%. However, be doubly cautious if they indicate that they have never experienced a failed search assignment. Ask them what assignments failed and why.
- * What references can the recruiter provide? Talk to those people and determine:
 - Was the project completed?
 - Did they understand the culture of the organization and develop candidates that were appropriate?
 - Ability to access candidates. Did they provide quality candidates?
 - Thoroughness? Responsiveness? Flexibility? Communications?
 - How detailed and informative was the reference data on candidates?
 - How objective was the search consultant? Did he/she try to “sell” one particular candidate?
 - General reputation in the industry?
 - Would they use this search consultant again?

Ask for and contact a reference the search consultant would expect to turn out negative. In the search business, no one's record is perfect.

- * Ask the search consultant to describe a typical search. How many contacts does he/she usually make? Where do the selected candidates typically come from? How long does the average search take?
- * What guarantee does the search firm offer? What happens if the search is not completed after one slate of candidates, after two slates, etc.? (Some larger search firms have a reputation of “walking away” from incomplete projects; small firms cannot afford to do so.) What happens if the selected candidate does not work out?
- * What documentation does the search firm provide to you the client? Ask for samples of position specifications, candidate “write-ups,” reference data, industry research data, etc.
- * How often will you receive progressive reports? (We update clients weekly and sometimes daily by electronic mail or telephone.)
- * Do they understand executive compensation packages?
- * What would their strategy be in looking for candidates? Is it comprehensive? Does it cover a variety of markets? Are they doing the obvious, such as looking in the local market first before chasing people all over the country?
- * What advice can the search consultant provide on relocation? Getting people to move to California is very difficult. What is his/her experience on this subject?

Subjective Measures

- * Do you get the feeling that the search consultant is on your side? Is he/she objective? Can they provide consulting help in terms of job definition, candidate selection, compensation, organization?
- * Are they willing to spend enough time to meet all of the decision makers, become familiar with your organization and fully define your need? Do you get the feeling that the consultant really cares about your company and the search assignment?
- * Are they willing to offer alternatives in conducting a search? Do they probe as to whether a search is really necessary? Do you get the feeling that they would be willing to walk away if a search was not really needed? Or, do you sense they are overly anxious to sell you something?
- * Can you work with the consultant comfortably? Is there good rapport between the two of you? Do you trust them as you would your attorney or accountant?
- * It is our belief that every search is a totally new effort. Be wary if someone tells you how easy this is going to be, as they have done this exact project many times in the past. Also, be wary if you are promised candidates too fast. A thorough search effort takes at least four to five weeks to generate and screen candidates. Anything less means that the search firm is merely sending resumes out of their files.

What image will the search consultant make on your behalf in the marketplace? A true search consultant acts as an extension of your company and will operate in a way, which enhances your image with the people contacted.

The bottom line on selection of a search consultant is the trust relationship established between the two of you. The closer and more candid the communications, the better the end product. The best situation is where you and the search consultant work towards a long-term association.