

A Job Hunter's Guide to Executive Recruiters

By Robert L. Pearson

Confusion about how recruiters operate has put many a career at a disadvantage. Executives in transition can't afford to let faulty assumptions foul up their prospects. Knowing how the search industry operates will make you a better, more successful candidate. To help you get the facts straight, here's a guide to working with recruiters based on my 20-plus years in executive search.

Search firms don't work for you. Recruiters are consultants who work on behalf of clients to fill jobs. Search firms earn fees from the companies hiring them to fill a position. A typical fee for filling a position is one-third of the compensation the candidate is paid in the first year. Recruiters may contact you if they have a position that fits your profile or to ask you to recommend other people who might be interested in the job.

Recruiting is a sales-driven business. Recruiters sell employers on their ability to fill specific positions in specific industries; they sell potential candidates on the benefits of a position; and they sell employers on the final slate of candidates they recommend. Remember, the recruiter is trying to hook you on considering an opportunity that, when filled, results in a payment to the search firm. It's up to you to do homework on the company and industry to validate the attractiveness of the opportunity.

Search executives are very busy. They juggle:

- Marketing to employers.
- Working with research for sources of potential candidates.
- Interviewing potential candidates.
- Presenting candidates to the hiring employer.
- Preparing candidates to interview.
- Debriefing candidates after interviews.
- Helping employers frame pay offers.
- Preparing hired candidates to make smooth transitions into their new positions.

Chances are slim that a busy recruiter will respond to an unsolicited call from a candidate or an e-mailed resume. Rather, you should contact the firm's research department, which maintains a database of candidates that's reviewed against future opportunities. One of the best ways to get into this database is to be a good source of other candidates' names.

Recruiters brook no deceptions or maneuvering. To effectively work with executive recruiters once they've contacted you, be professional and let the recruiter take the lead.

- Never stretch the truth about your past job experience, education, income or other issues. The facts will likely surface, and lying is the kiss of death.
- Keep appointments, return calls, and cooperate. Don't play hard to get.
- Agree to reference checking. Prove you have nothing to hide.
- Bow out early if you aren't really interested. Offer to be a resource and always try to help.
- Let the recruiter run interference for you during compensation discussions.
- Avoid unnecessary follow-up. It's counterproductive. The recruiter will call you if he or she has a good reason.
- Don't cultivate an offer to gain leverage at your current job. This strategy of gaining a promotion or raise usually backfires, so find another method.

Don't take it personally if you don't make it to the next round. Realize that if 200 prospects are uncovered during a recruiter's initial research, perhaps 50 will make the first cut, five will be finalists and only one will get the job. The search process aims for a perfect fit, and if you aren't chosen, you weren't the one.

The search industry is large but fragmented. According to the Association of Executive Search Consultants, industry revenues in 2003 topped \$5.6 billion, yet the 10 largest firms accounted for less than one third of that revenue. Therefore, you've probably never heard of many reputable and successful search firms. You can find information on virtually any firm or recruiter in "The Directory of Executive Recruiters" (Kennedy Information Inc., 2004).

The type of recruiter you work with can bear on your search. There are two types of search firms: retainer and contingency. Find out which type your recruiter works for and consider the impact the distinctions may make on your job hunt.

Retainer firms:

- Are hired by client companies to fill a position and are paid a monthly retainer for their efforts regardless of whether candidates they locate are hired or the job is filled.
- Receive exclusive assignments to fill specific job openings.
- Are more often used to fill higher-level positions paying salaries of \$100,000 or more.
- Won't contact you about an opening while another recruiter at the firm is considering you for an assignment.
- Will put you off-limits for other searches during your first year in a job it placed you in, no matter how qualified you are.

Contingency firms:

- Are more often used to find candidates for junior and midlevel opportunities that typically pay annual salaries below \$75,000.
- Are paid only when candidates they recommend are hired.
- Usually don't work on an exclusive basis with their clients.
- Receive only a limited expense budget (or none at all) from a client, and so aren't likely to travel to meet with you in person.
- Work quickly and submit as many candidates as they can.

Working with a recruiter has its advantages. The benefits to candidates include:

- **Presentation:** A recruiter introducing you to a client company makes you stand out from the crowd. You're put forward by a trusted source, rather than through just your own direct contact.
- **Security:** A company paying for a search is generally financially strong and is more committed to your success.
- **Hidden job leads:** Many searches are confidential.
- **Preparation:** A recruiter's income depends on you landing the job. They can give you insight into the hiring company and interviewers.
- **Negotiation.** Their compensation depends on your compensation.
- **Buffering:** A recruiter serves as a useful information channel between you and the company.

You need a strategic plan. Every executive in transition should have one ready to articulate to a recruiter. Your plan should:

- Reflect your current and long-term goals.
- Reflect your understanding of your past achievements and successes and your failures.
- Align your goals with your values.
- Leverage your strengths and identify areas where you could improve.
- Establish specific goals and tasks for yourself, with clear steps for achieving them.
- Include deadlines and assignments you're committed to attaining.
- Describe your networking strategy, which accounts for the majority of successful job searches.

Those who apply as much planning and intensity to their search as they do to their paid jobs will be more successful sooner.

Clearly, the process of finding a new and challenging position depends on knowing whom you're working with and how they operate. These insights should give you a leg up on your interactions with recruiters.

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